

Opening Minds, Opening Hearts Season 2 Ep #11: A Common Sense of Shared Oneness With The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault

[cheerful music starts]

Colleen Thomas [00:00:02] Welcome to Opening Minds, Opening Hearts, a podcast about the transformative practice of Centering Prayer. In each episode, we will talk to Friends of Contemplative Outreach about their personal practice. Listen in as our guests share insights about the teachings of Father Thomas Keating, how the practice impacts their work in the world, and their thoughts about how Centering Prayer connects to the living traditions of contemplation and meditation. We are your hosts, Colleen Thomas.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:00:35] And Mark Dannenfelser.

Colleen Thomas [00:00:36] Centering Prayer practitioners and contemplative life seekers who love to talk a little too much about how the practice of contemplative prayer transforms our inner and outer worlds. Our hope is to open the door for you to explore more deeply this powerful practice of Centering Prayer.

[cheerful music ends]

Colleen Thomas [00:01:00] Welcome to the Contemplative Outreach Podcast, Opening Minds, Opening Hearts. I'm Colleen Thomas.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:01:08] And I'm Mark Dannenfelser. It's good to see you again. Colleen.

Colleen Thomas [00:01:10] It's good to see you. Mark.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:01:13] This is our last episode. Wow. That went fast. 12 episodes this season.

Colleen Thomas [00:01:19] 12 episodes. I know that sounded so daunting when our producer suggested we go for 12. We did six in the first season, and that felt like a lot. But here we are.

Mark Dannenfels [00:01:32] We are, we did it. One moment at a time. And today we have a very exciting guest with us to have some discussion as we've been having all season long about the practice itself and the expanding vision that goes along with that. And also how we continue to share it and especially be mindful of the changing needs of contemplatives. I'm really excited about our guests today.

Colleen Thomas [00:01:58] Yeah. Especially talking about serving the changing needs of contemplatives and considering that our guests today has really been at the forefront of this kind of contemporary contemplative movement, maybe we can call it here in the US. And so in order to talk about what we might consider changing, it's good to know our origin story. And so we're excited to welcome Cynthia Bourgeault. Cynthia is a modern day mystic and an Episcopal priest, a writer and an internationally acclaimed retreat leader who divides her time between solitude in her seaside hermitage in Maine, and a pretty demanding schedule traveling globally to spread the recovery of the Christian contemplative and wisdom paths. Cynthia is also a faculty member, emeritus of the Center for Action and Contemplation, and the founding director of an International Network of Wisdom Schools, uniting classic Christian mystical and monastic teaching with contemporary practices in mindfulness and embodied presence. It's so wonderful to have you with us today, Cynthia. Welcome.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:03:24] Thank you, Colleen. Thank you. Mark. Thank you Thomas, who probably has a hand in all this and let's see what we can turn up today in our conversations.

Mark Dannenfels [00:03:34] Yeah. I also want to say welcome and you really have been at this for some time. You worked directly with Thomas for many years as a student and then as a colleague. So Centering Prayer is very much figures into your work and your ministry in contemplative life. We like to ask all of our guests how you actually first came to the practice of Centering Prayer. How did that unfold for you? If you can go back there for a moment.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:04:04] Can I think back that far? It's a kind of funny story and it's a little bit different, but Thomas was on my radar screen from about 1981 on. He had a cameo appearance in a real iconic book by Jacob Needleman called *Lost Christianity*. And at that point, Jacob Needleman was commenting on very interesting experiments, which were going on at the monastery, the Trappist Monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts with three monks who were experimenting with something called the Centering Prayer. And Jerry Needleman was not sure what to make of this, but he was quite impressed by Thomas Keating and by the innovative these monks in reaching out to what he saw to be in need, both inside

the monastery and implicitly out there in the world. I just made a little file of that and about half a dozen years later, I was out making my annual pilgrimage with the monks at Big Sur, Bali Monks at Big Sur.

That had been a habit of mine for a decade or more. And one of the people there who was an extended retreatant gave me a copy of Open Mind, Open Heart, and said, ah, I find this interesting. So I started reading it and flipping through the pages and found, Hmm, this is fascinating. A lot of it resonated with a Quaker silence of my childhood. A lot of it drove me crazy because I couldn't quite figure out what you were supposed to do with your attention. But a few years later, [*indiscernible* [00:05:34]] magazine asked me to interview some sort of Christian who for their 25th anniversary issue of this very sort of high tone inter spiritual spiritual magazine. And somehow as I started thinking through the Rolodex what Christians could conduct themselves in an interview that would also have the whole Dalai Lama in it and a few others, I just came up with the name Thomas Keating.

So they said, great, go interview him. So that's how I first met him at Chrysalis House in 1989. And he looked right across at me and said, perhaps you should come and actually try Centering Prayer on location. He said, rubbing his hands the way he did when he was hot for a new victim. So I packed my bags and headed to Snowmass and the rest is history. I liked Centering Prayer. I got on with it just fine. I loved Snowmass, just absolutely fell in love with the place. I knew I wanted to go back. And I knew that the best terms for going back was to become a Presenter as it was then called. So I came back six months later for Presenters training and we were off and running by then. So Centering Prayer has been really a powerful part of my life, a daily part of my life since late 1889, 1889. Geez, I'm over my myself. So that's how it started.

Colleen Thomas [00:06:59] And Cynthia, was there something in particular about Thomas, the person that also contributed to your going back to Snowmass, what was he like as a person and how did a friendship form between the two of you?

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:07:16] It started off with its bumps that when I first went, it was Thomas was just the head of what I would call the Dark Knight of Spirit. I'll be writing about this new book. He was about to take a profound plunge to a time of stripping and deepening, but he was at the top of his game and he was still quite imperial at that time. And he was all into empire building. He was quite excited about the foundation of Contemplative Outreach, which a buddy of his had set up for him. Very excited about the movement, very excited about the new plan, a foot to have regional coordinators. He latched right onto me at

the start as somebody he saw that was right and might be helpful. And he sent me to work as a couple of editors.

I edited his *Invitation to Love* book in the first couple of works he did. So he put me to work there and he put me to work connecting me with some of his buddies. And I was off and running in the little fledgling network back in the early 90s. It was all going swimmingly until I got in a conflict with one of the major people in his network who had I think what we would nowadays call a personality disorder. And he caused a lot of disruption in the five years before he finally backed himself into the corner and nearly brought down the whole work. But I was one of his primary early casualties and Thomas was not at that point about to be disenamored of this guy who was helping him build his Contemplative Outreach empire.

So there wasn't much I could do that if I stayed around. I was going to get dismembered brick by brick and took off to an invitation in Canada to build a contemplative group. And it's typical of things that the invitation came because Thomas arranged it. They had invited him to come and do a retreat thing, and he had sent me in his stead. So they came back and asked me to stay, and Thomas had a hand in it and supported it. It actually saved our relationship and repositioned it early. The neat thing about the assignment I took on in British Columbia was that it was not a Contemplative Outreach franchise. It was deliberately established as a local coalition between people doing Christian meditation, Centering Prayer, Christian vipassana, basically anybody who wanted to learn to meditate and go deeper into silence in a basic Christian milieu.

So you couldn't use the material that was already beginning to be emerged and cast in stone in the Contemplative Outreach network because you also had to accommodate the Christian meditation people that were doing the same thing in their network. And so basically Thomas permission to develop a couple of new courses to work with the introductory workshop, but to change the first workshop, the prayer as relationship wouldn't fly because a lot of people in the network we were dealing with wanted nothing to do with a relationship with God. They had a much more Buddhist flare to them. And the reason they wanted meditation was they wanted to find out how it changed your brain so you could enter non-dual space and get rid of this whole personalistic religion. So anyway, different clientele, much more sort of pan-Asian feel into it up there. And Thomas set me up to, he said, just go set up what works.

And he supported it by paying a couple of annual visits to come up and lead the retreat. We sort of backed me into being his original kind of on the ground R&D team. And in that mode, we just built a slowly deepening relationship where a lot of it was just getting over the projections

we'd placed on each other that we realized that we couldn't help each other. I couldn't have him be my big daddy and set him up in anything. And he realized that I wasn't what he thought a woman and a Protestant and a Christian was. And we moved into a new place, and particularly in the last decade and a half or so of his life when I was living close by in Snowmass working in Aspen, we just fell into being buddies. I'd come and see him once or twice a season.

And our conversations always went on for two or three hours. He just sort of ranged through what he was doing, what he was learning, what excited me, every time he introduced me to a new guy who was going to be male, who was going to be his heir apparent in Contemplative Outreach. What excited thing have you heard of, but we shared stuff and I loved what was happening to him as he dug in deeply to his inner spiritual network and wore his laurels beautifully as the rest of the world woke up. This guy is a world class enlightened master. And to watch him rise to the occasion and become more and more deeply attuned to a world which desperately needed oneness. To grow out of old Catholic boxes without ever denying them, but you just watched him move into being a spiritual citizen of the world and servant of humanity. And it was a profoundly moving position.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:12:44] Yeah, it's beautiful. As were you also moving into the world in that way too? And your teaching has such a depth to it and brings on in so many areas. You already mentioned Christian meditation, Vipassana, Centering Prayer itself, mindfulness, your Gurdjieff work. You're bringing all of that in and there's a real depth there. And also I think a nuance in the practice that we don't always hear. I'm curious to hear more about you talking about objectless awareness, which I think is not often talked about in Centering Prayer circles, or I don't hear it very often, but can you say more about the practice itself and thoughts and the gaps in between thoughts and why that's important?

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:13:28] Yeah, I'll see what I can do with it. When I entered the practice in the late 1980s, early 90s, Thomas was still struggling with how to language the idea of letting go of a thought and of letting go and moving into silence. And there was a lot of language about when you realize you're not being attracted by thoughts anymore, it's okay to let your sacred word go, but how do you know that you're not being attracted to a thought without that big a thought itself? And he was caught in this solipsism, as they call it, this self-reinforcing vicious circle that he couldn't language his way out of. And he was getting some flack from some of his Hindu buddies who said, this is just a failed Vipassana. You try a

devotional practice and then you switch to an awareness practice, and then when it's not working, you switch back to a devotional practice and they say, what gives?

And I knew in a way it was a languaging problem, not a theological one. I don't know whether I was the one that initially put this bug in Thomas's ear, but he certainly picked it up. I said, let's not start from the whole end of trying to make your mind silent. Let's start from the idea of what you're doing in Centering Prayer is you're offering something in the model of kenosis. You're giving something and it's about the configuration of your attention. And Centering Prayer already stresses this in its wonderful teaching about thoughts. A thought is anything that attracts your attention. And that's been there as far as I know in the teaching. And it's a very strong, simple starting place. If you're thinking about an itch on your nose, it's a thought. If you're thinking about an insider, an inspiration, it's a thought. If you're thinking about the beauty of God or the blessed Virgin Mary, it's a thought.

It's not about the quality of the object of your thinking about it. I'm thinking beautiful thoughts about God. So this is holy. It's the configuration of your attention. And if your mind is going out to an object of your attention, the instructions in Centering Prayer are to let it go. And that part is easy to do. It's not easy to want to do it as Thomas thought right from the start, but it's easy. You just shift your mind. You just let go of it. And it doesn't matter if another thought comes right back in. This is how I was able to help him. I think with the kenosis thing, I said, every time we give up an object of our thinking, we're doing it in the spirit of solidarity with Christ on the cross, though his state was out of God, he did not deem equality with God, something he should cling to.

Rather he emptied himself. You empty yourself with thoughts by just letting go of them when they come up. And every time you do that is where the action is actually happening in prayer. So it's not about getting rid of thoughts so that you can achieve a stillness and then God speaks to you in the stillness. It's about in this attitude of actually being willing to let go of the piece of yourself, that God who's perfectly capable of making himself known in the midst of noise can enter the willing. It's not the external condition of silence, but it's the willing in the internal condition of willingly letting go of your thoughts. So with that, you could say, well, stop wondering whether this is silence, whether it's quiet, whether it's good. Just realize that if your attention is on a thought, you're supposed to do this thing, let it go.

That was the first part of it. And it cuts through about 90% of the self-reflective confusion. But the final part is this, that when you switch to what's called the phenomenology of consciousness, that all of our mind in its usual state always flows subject to object. Our

theology is written that way. Our idealism is written that way. Our self image is written that way. It's the language we speak in. It's the operating system that we use in our normal state of consciousness. And it drives our sense of small self. It drives our sense of separation from the world. It drives our sense of separation from everybody else, of having a goal of having a journey of me and mine. It drives all that. And as you learn to be able to become aware without putting your attention on an object, it's almost like your attention stays gathered around a single pole.

And strangely, you're still aware, but you're aware without the bits and pieces and in the other traditions of the world and some of the great spiritual traditions, particularly in Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, this capacity to hold awareness without an object is foundational to what's called non-dual consciousness. Non-Dual consciousness is not a state of being specially close to God and feeling happy because I'm so close to God that's still dualistic. It's the capacity to respond to the world and see the world from non separation. And the big separation is created between subject and object. So right from the start, without your ever knowing it, from the very first time you sit down in your introductory workshop for the first 20 minutes of prayer, you are experiencing the short, direct route to objectless awareness by learning to let go of the objects. We're practicing it, we're practicing it, we're practicing it.

And I used to have to beat myself up about it and say, c'mon girlfriend, it's only 20 minutes. Then you can obsess and fantasize for all the rest of the day all you want, think about God, think about your neighbor, think about your false self, think about whatever you damn please. But for this 20 minutes, we're just going to do this well in solidarity with Christ in trust that the generosity and sincerity of my offering in this is going to begin to carve new neurological tracks that new spiritual awareness can flow down. And I think that's what happens in Centering Prayer practitioners over the long haul. I know that's what happened to Thomas Keating and what is largely responsible for his quantum growth in the final two decades of his life. It's true for a lot of us who are just regular practitioners, we're beginning to familiarize ourselves, acclimatized to what it's like to walk around in a state of alert, gathered presence without constantly having to do the translator mechanism of, how am I doing?

Do they like me? Do they appreciate me? How far am I on my spiritual journey? Am I going, am I blessed yet? It cuts through all that kind of verbal translator mechanism. So I think this is both the great gift of Centering Prayer and the great challenge for experienced practitioners who have developed some skill in holding themselves, in gathering themselves in this silence. And when this silence is actually begin doing, as Thomas used to say, to morph into presence, and you are more and more consistently in the presence of the divine in God's own language as just sheer presence, the silence fills up with content. You don't have to add verbal or psychological

content. You learn to be in that state. And as you do, it creates a natural relaxation of your smaller self and all the agendas that go with it, which are basically variations on the theme of, how am I doing and what do I need?

Mark Dannenfelser [00:21:43] We talk about objectless awareness. It sounds like you're saying that then also leads to selfless awareness too.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:21:51] Selflessness in its conscious way.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:21:53] Yeah, yeah.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:21:54] Yeah, exactly. Not selflessness, the way we hear it at one level of our being, which means doing unselfish things still from a strong self-centered, but really not having that kind of concrete, nucleated, self-centered that needs to be concerned with it anyway. It just does. It just does in response to what's needed. And it's the dynamic of non-dual. I believe that a lot of people who've been faithful practitioners of Centering Prayer over the years have got some experience bank accumulated now. They've banked their energy for this thing. And what's really one of the needs of the movement, I believe, is to dig more seriously into the final teaching that was coming from Teacher Thomas where he is beginning to lay down, add a whole new tier to the original Contemplative Outreach teachings, to more and

more accommodate and explain and lead people the next leg of the way as these capacities begin to stabilize within them.

[solemn music starts]

Mark Dannenfelser [00:23:00] In the Christian tradition, Contemplative Prayer is the opening of your mind and heart to God who is beyond thoughts, words, and emotions. Centering Prayer is a method designed to facilitate contemplation. The method suggests four guidelines.

One, choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within you.

Two, sit comfortably and relatively still close your eyes or leave them slightly open and silently introduce your sacred word.

Three, when you notice you have become engaged with a thought, simply return ever so gently to your sacred word.

And four, at the end of the 20-minute prayer period, let go of the sacred word and remain in silence for a couple of minutes. The additional time invites you to bring the atmosphere of silence into everyday life.

[solemn music ends]

Colleen Thomas [00:24:05] I am thinking about when you're talking about kenosis and this giving something up, and then these other words you use willingly and in trust. And the generosity of my offering, the relationship between that act of giving something up or willingly letting something go, and my thoughts drift to whom am I giving something to, whom am I emptying into? And one of the aspects of Father Thomas's teachings that seems missing from his work around a universal non-dual, non-binary God, is that he didn't seem to say much about the divine feminine. And I know that's one of the major changes in my relation to the prayer and a fruit of my practice, is this transformation of my concept of God and this more feminine aspect of God that for me, has made it easier to be in that kind of emptying, trusting, willing

relationship with. Can you shed some light on Father Thomas's teaching around the divine feminine or how it evolved and how the divine feminine plays a role in your work and teaching?

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:25:54] Yeah, I'll try to, and it's a very complex question. And I want to honor you, Colleen, for having the courage to raise it, because I think it's one of these really hard questions that are going to be really important to the integrity of the movement as we move into a new generation without Thomas's fatherly energy immediately at the helm. And I have to talk about this at a couple of levels, and please pardon me for that, because it's the only way we can arrive at a resolution, which is how he came to the resolution. That at the level you phrase the question, I would say that this is very much an intermediate level from a spiritual journey where these things are really important. Who do I pray to? What do I image? What is the role model? And Thomas knew this. In the heart of the prayer itself they're subject object questions.

Who do I pray to? What is my concept of God? This is still the dynamic of dualistic thinking. That's okay, let's not say that's spiritually immature. We are in this world. This is how we have to happen in the world. And Thomas worked in his dynamic this way. So at this level, it's really important to get the concepts straight, to have the right view in the prayer itself for that 20 minutes, twice a day. Trust that it's not that it's irrelevant, but it's not what we're doing as we simply practice letting go, you take your best shot and you give because there's something in you that's capable of giving. You trust because there's something in you that's capable of trusting. That's your strength as a being. It's not in response to something out there that's the object.

It's your innate God, inhabited being strength that allows you to do this prayer. So never forget that, that's the gift that will everything in the prayer. Now, when we move back out to that other level of how do you deal with the concepts and imagery, I would say there's a problem there. And that Thomas was an old school patriarch, and I believe he remained so to the end, wonderfully endearingly, sweetly. But when you look at some of his buddies like Andrew Harvey who dived headlong into the divine feminine, when you look at Andrew Cohen, when you look at even my teacher, Bruno Barnhart out at Big Sur, who is not famous, not super famous, but people in Contemplative Outreach know him, he just really went down the path. And Thomas Burton, whose whole final work is on Hagia Sophia, the Divine Feminine, Thomas never did it.

I don't think he even had an excessive interest in women mystics. I mean, he likes Theresa, he likes St. Theresa Lisieux, but you don't find an extraordinary work with devotion to the blessed

virgin. He lives in a man's world, I think in a way, and maybe it's washed my mouth out with soap, but women to him were always nuns. I remember I sometimes think, every time I go see him, it's like we're reenacting the whale rider. He starts his conversations with, well, let me tell you about this one that I found, and here's another man, and here's another man who he's really excited about that's going to be his heir apparent. I say, okay, Thomas, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And the women ran the show and they ran the workshops and they ran the training. But the sense of first of all, that a woman being a spiritual equal to a priestly man and the sense of that there was anything in the divine feminine and the divine imaging of God, he didn't go there.

And I think partially, and I love him for this, that his relationship with God was so personal and so deeply grounded in the beloved Father. And that was both psychological and theological. And that relationship with God was so personal and tender that he couldn't finally betray it to remake God in a non-binary fashion. He just couldn't do it. I don't begrudge him that. I mean, it would've been far worse if he tried to do it in a sort of half pass or in cerebral. I take it that the gift he gave us was that he just dived into that space where all these kinds of concepts that we think we need when we're still at that level of our being, we're shown that you can just go by through when he is talking about God as ultimate reality. God is unmanifest when he is talking about a profound, prolonged relationship with the unmanifest like he does in *Reflections on the Unknowable*.

I mean, he's out there, he's just so miles off the chart of anything Christianity can grasp. You just don't know what to do. I think that what we really have to do if we aren't going to just tear our hair out about what he didn't do, is accept what he could do as a human being with honesty, integrity, accept very deeply what he gave us that carries us beyond this and begin to work with our new generation in our new time to continue to expand and augment the genuine divine wisdom, feminine presence as it's accessible in the theology and teachings of Centering Prayer.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:31:33] You're exploring that in your upcoming book that part of the kind of the unfolding and that tracking, that growth and that transcendence and transformation in him. Could you say a little bit more about that? Because you're really working with some of that later material, and you were right there watching it all happen as well.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:31:54] Yeah, and I'm loving it. I'm up to my neck. I have right at my feet a whole pile of about a dozen books that I bring along that beginning with, for me, *Reflections on the Unknowable*, which is a wild. Thomas growing rapidly. And some of the

ones that Contemplative Outreach is republishing now, *God is All in All* will be out shortly. *That We May Be One*, will be out. I wrote the foreword to it, it'll be out next March. And the *From The Mind to the Heart*, which is the book version of the video series, that interview that Thomas did with John Osborne, these are very wild books. And they leave us with a huge and new breathtaking take on Thomas. And of course, *The Secret Embrace*, the final Zen-like poems that he left us to unpack. And I would say that the biggest transformation that I see in Thomas is that he becomes more and more aware of the world, the needs of the world, of oneness, of humanity, of the oneness of God.

He becomes aware of the deficits in all the spiritual streams of the abilities of the tendencies in all the spiritual streams to get hog tied and dogma and doctrine and protocol and rigor and separation, and not be able to come together to talk and to lead humanity. You hear him saying things like, the worst crime that we can commit nowadays is [indiscernible 00:33:69]. And for him, oneness becomes the banner that he travels on. And oneness expresses itself in three ways. Oneness expresses itself first of all, mystically with inside us as we collapse that subject object dualism, and can simply be with God in that way he calls, there is no other, and there is no other not because you've gotten so big and fancy and important that you've become God. But because after those years and years of just practicing releasing that line between subject and object, it all just flows into, well, the living surrounding essence, God.

So there's oneness at that level. Then there's oneness among the religious traditions. And Thomas's work with the Snowmass Conference is more and more in escalating work with the secular, but the spiritual, but not religious world that really took off during the last two decades of his life, was the parallel track to what he did in Contemplative Outreach, that became more and more important and more and more of the religious leaders of the world looked at him and said, this guy, this is an enlightened Christian master. And he was working full-time with the Snowmass Conference and with people at the same sort of level to create and break down the separations between the religions. And for him, I think that this was what contemplation came to mean by the end of his life. The reason he loved contemplative so much is because it contained the tools that broke down those artificial senses of separation.

And you're actually closer to somebody who's a contemplative on a whole different path than you're likely to be to someone on your path who's caught in fundamentalism or doctrinal assistance. That's called the line level confusion by Thomas's old buddy Ken Wilber. And it's really true. So Thomas brought together people who were contemplatives in all the spiritual paths, realizing that they were going to have a common sense of shared oneness that broke down the separation between doctrines, between religions, between people who were different and let us flow together heart to heart. And he realized that heart to heart flowing

together was the only thing that was going to spearhead humanity coming together. And if we didn't, he said in the very, very last talk that he ever gave, which was just amazing an impromptu deathbed talk. He said, there's two things that are going to save the planet, silence and science.

And by silence he meant lived universally ability led by contemplatives to flow into the insides of each other's skins and to be one outside as human beings as centered beings. And by science he meant getting beyond doctrine and dogma and coercive and manipulative ideology and listening to the hard, beautiful objective cosmic truths that are being mirrored to us by cosmologists, by neuroscience. He spent a lot of time in the last years of his life hanging out with people on the leading edge in neuroscience because he realized that as we began to understand how the brain works, we're going to be able to understand why we get ourselves into such terrible, screwed up messes. And he realized that the contemplation had a lot of tools that could cut through some of these messes that we get ourselves in. He became more and more aware of his post as a citizen in the world. And I believe he still continues to occupy that post beyond the grave.

Colleen Thomas [00:37:39] There's so much there. I think as we have been focusing on the changing needs, one of the more common concerns that may not be fair around Centering Prayer in this current spiritual landscape is we hear people saying, I'm not sure if this practice is for me. I need a more embodied practice. How do you respond to that? Or would you respond to that? Is Centering Prayer considered an embodied spiritual practice? And we know that you do incorporate a lot of the Gurdjieff movement and chanting in your own practice in your Wisdom Schools, but I'd love to hear you maybe talk a little bit more about embodiment, which has become a bit of a trendy word now, but your insight would be welcome.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:38:42] I think embodiment is the big issue for Centering Prayer in the next generation. And I'll talk a little bit more about what I mean by this. But first of all, to give some context, there's been a tendency nowadays to separate out movements, both Centering Prayer and Christian meditation for sure. And make them, in a sense, little religions in their own right as if they're the whole path in themselves. That your contemplation is going Centering Prayer for 20 minutes twice a day and going off to a retreat when you can. But the way Thomas originally reconstructed this practice was not as a standalone practice, let alone a standalone spirituality, but it was as a key piece that had fallen out of his own Benedictine rhythm. And that was causing the monks to go dead on the vine because they couldn't find a

living relationship with the silence and the beauty and the spirituality for which they'd given up their lives.

And he was heartbroken about that. He developed with a little help from his friends, with the big help of William Menninger, a process that would allow the people, his monastic community to do exactly what it does to Centering Prayer people nowadays, to taste a direct experience of God alive near of oneness. But it was not intended to be a religion in its own right, that this would then allow them to spill back into their Benedictine path. And the Benedictine path is the strongest. It's the taproot of spirituality in the West. And it's a grounded, embodied path. It's embodied, it's three centered, as Gurdjieffian would call it, because it's got a good physical component in there. You're physically working in the world, at least you used to be. And if you go to Snowmass, you know you go by Brother Raymond, and he is still driving the tractor and they're hay in the fields and it's physical.

And physical is an absolute non-negotiable time of your spiritual wellbeing. And if you don't have it, you're going to get trapped in your emotional center and you're going to go through three boxes of Kleenex at a Centering Prayer retreat. I use to fuss with him about that. I said, the problem is you're bringing these people in, you're setting them up like prince or princesses on a Peapod. You're cooking all their meals, you're serving all their stuff. You're just making them meditate. They can take a walk in the country, but they have no way to ground the intense depth of emotional feeling that is being generated in them. They weep and they get way way more dramatic and unbalanced than they need to be. So part of what happened when I went off and founded the Wisdom Schools, it was a direct attempt to recapture the very grounded template of Benedictine free bodied awareness.

Realized that physical labor, not just walking in the beautiful countryside, but hard labor in service of the community, in service of the common aim, cleaning toilets, mopping, chopping carrots is an essential part of the transformation program. It grounds the spiritual energy. Chanting in the choir is an essential part because it raises and integrates the deep emotion. It allows emotion, which is personal and possessive to move into feeling, which is universal and non possessive. So all of these things round the practice and allow people to be Centering Prayer people and still be sane. The other part that Thomas inherited from his Trappist tradition though, was this whole thing that what you were trying to do is to make your body be neutral

so that it didn't bother you. There was still this lack of embodiment, which is unfortunately characteristic of male monasticism of a certain generation that you know, stay away from it.

You don't want it to bite you too badly because it'll tell you everything you're missing. So it's this, let's just go away from it. Let's just make the body. And so there isn't a good theology. Thomas didn't really get it till the very end when his dual old body that he trashed all his life, refused to die. He says, I am stronger than I thought I was. But I think what's really needed in the next generation, another task on our plate is to really reconnect Centering Prayer with its fuller original monastic, what I call the wisdom content. That is to get the physical piece back in fully. And not just to keep my body well, but to understand that the body is an expressive instrument of our full reality. And not only that, our first body contains our second body within it, our more subtle body.

We can't get to the second body without the act of participation of first body. And if you doubt me, go see Eckhart Tolle in his favorite line. Nobody gets enlightened outside their bodies. Check it out, check it out. And so the real goal I believe, is to learn to fine tune the body, to bring it in, to deliberately honor it, teach it to learn to meditate in positions that come closer into a better posture so that our life currents are flowing in our spine. A little basic yoga folks.

Colleen Thomas [00:44:04] Yes, which you do.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:44:09] Yeah, could go a long way. The body won't resist if you don't make it so hard for it. You could sit, you can do Centering Prayer in your body, not out of your body. And I think this is, again, a growing edge that we'll find wonderful ways to bring back in. [indiscernible 00:44:24] is a particularly good instrument for bridging the gap and evoking some of the deep healing tone that was always there in the Christian life, but for people in the real world. So I think there is a need to play around and hopefully we won't get embalmed in the art form that we had for the first 40 years. It worked. It's a beautiful artifact, but remember that Centering Prayer took shape in the "Me" generation in the 1980s. That it had a therapeutic languaging to it and a kind of psychotherapeutic modality that people were going in there to regression in the service of transcendence was a phrase that Thomas was quite enamored of for a while. So it's got some of those trappings about it that I think it's more than ready to grow out of and that part of the genius and the challenge on the plate of a new generation of leadership will be to handle this transition respectfully.

I watched the religion, I grew up in Christian science die on the vine in three generations because it embalmed everything the founding director did. Every move, every gesture, even

though it was related to social errors that were five generations before it now. So the tricky wicket is always how to be respectfully grateful for the legacy that has been received from the first generation of practitioners. To honor it, to not mess around with it lightly, and yet to feel free and empowered to go directly to the source, which is always there. To dialogue with our time, as the two of you have been doing so beautifully in raising the hard questions about feminism and embodiment to feel free to let the wine skin carry the wine, which is the new wine of Centering Prayer itself. It's just not going to stay put in the old wine skins that we've created for it because the nature of this prayer is to change things from the inside out. It's going to start melting those wines' skins from inside no matter what you do. And unless you embalm them in concrete, you just got to grow. Sorry.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:46:45] Cynthia, I so appreciate your doing just that tremendous respect and acknowledging the legacy that is really there in Thomas, but also continuing on and not being afraid to engage that and continue the growth. And there's that maybe in terms of Contemplative Outreach, we're in a certain place as far as Thomas's passing, the grieving of that and also the urging to continue on to live on and not just get lost back there somehow, but not forgetting that either, and you've spoken about that so beautifully.

The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault [00:47:24] I love what's happening right now that it may generally we're lucky with our new coordinator, Mary Jane Yates, with her Pan world background with her African roots, and I know a lot of the European Contemplative Outreach communities, and there's a different flavor there. It may and it may be time to really stand back and invite the wider world community to take a more proactive role. You know, the founding group was so terribly American, but I think within the Hispanic community, within the worldwide community, that's where I find the real living life in this right now. That the initiatives into the worldwide and the freedom to cut a wider slack around the little idols, which were regional idols anyway. I mean, the folks in Czechoslovakia the folks in, let's just go for it, and the innovation of the programs when they aren't tied to the American ways of doing business in the American shrines has really got a lot of life in it. My message for the day, if there was any, is that by the end, Thomas was thinking global. It's not so much how can the world

serve Contemplative Outreach, but how can Contemplative Outreach serve the world? How can we adapt ourselves to a world in crisis?

[solemn music starts]

What can we bring in terms of presence? What can we bring in terms of energy and understanding and compassion and depth? These are the questions I think that Thomas is asking us to consider.

Colleen Thomas [00:48:57] Thanks for joining us on this episode of Opening Minds, Opening Hearts. Visit our website, contemplativeoutreach.org to subscribe to the show on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and wherever else you listen to podcasts. You can also follow us on Instagram @contemplativeoutreachLtd. To learn more about our guests and their work, you can find info in the show notes for each episode.

If you enjoyed this episode, you might want to check out our YouTube channel: C-O-U-T-R-E-A-C-H. Coutreach.

Thanks for listening and see you next time.

Mark Dannenfelser [00:49:43] Season two of Opening Minds, Opening Hearts was made possible by a grant from the [Trust for the Meditation Process](https://trustformeditation.org), a charitable foundation encouraging meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative prayer. To find out more about the foundation, go to trustformeditation.org. If you are a grateful listener and would like to support this podcast, go to contemplativeoutreach.org/podcast to make a donation of any amount. And thank you for your support.

Colleen Thomas [00:50:18] This episode of Opening Minds, Opening Hearts is produced by [Crys & Tiana](#).

[solemn music ends]

